

my lips they burn (from the cigarettes) by thylionheart

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

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Summary:

Max and Will skip class.

my lips they burn (from the cigarettes)

Author's Note:

First things first, I think I should admit that I know there isn't a high demand for this ship, and that it is a crack ship. But oh well! I love this ship, and a special shoutout to Cori for bringing it to my attention♡

So this fic is set in 1985, during the gang's freshman year, and I wanted it to parallel Joyce and Hopper in high school. Lucas and Max (who I do think are absolutely adorable) aren't together; in this story their relationship didn't progress any farther after the Snow Ball, which, depending on what happens in season 3, may make this story an AU. I just didn't want there to be any drama between the party members.

The title is taken from the song Forrest Gump by Frank Ocean.

"Brings me back to old times."

"What?"

"Well, sharing my cigarettes between—"

"—5th and 6th period."

"Yeah. Under the steps."

“Will! C’mon, we’re gonna be late.” Jonathan jangled his keys insistently from where he stood by the front door, his expression a peculiar mix of amused and exasperated.

Will nearly dropped his box of crayons as he dug through its contents, searching for a particular color. “Just a couple more details, I swear—ah, got it!” He pulled out a mandarin orange crayon and scribbled furiously on his poster, hunching over the kitchen table.

“It’s just for school, it doesn’t have to be perfect,” Jonathan quipped, but he waited relatively patiently for his little brother to add the finishing touches to his project.

When Will was done, he quickly rolled up the poster and slipped a rubber band around it to hold it in place. He threw on his backpack and started to clean up the mess he had made on the table.

“No time,” Jonathan chided, “I’ll clean it up after school. C’mon, let’s go!”

By some act of God, the Byers brothers managed to make it to school with two minutes to spare. As soon as they stepped into the high school the first bell tolled, and Will carefully slipped his poster into his locker before bolting to homeroom.

His stomach spent the first half of the day twisted into knots as he anxiously awaited English class. During lunch he picked at his food, appetite absent. By the time the bell signifying the end of lunch rang, Will could hardly contain his nervous excitement.

He ran to retrieve his poster from his locker and then met up with Max at hers as per usual. They were the only members of the party who shared fifth period English, and as such had fallen into the easy routine of walking to class together after lunch.

Max noticed the anxious way he tapped his rolled poster against his palm, and she nudged his shoulder. “Excited for your presentation, Byers?”

Will couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Max grinned in kind. “I can’t wait to see your poster. It’s gonna be

amazing. And much better than my shit show.”

“Yours wasn’t *that* bad,” Will protested, but Max just laughed.

“Oh, but it was. Not only did Jesse Aarons look like a hairy turnip, but I forgot to give him eyebrows. And a nose. I was positive Mrs. Walker was gonna have a stroke when I showed the class.”

Will chuckled at that. “Well, I liked it. And you were so confident standing up in front of everyone. It was really cool.”

Max thanked him with a smile, eyes shining.

They stepped into class together and Will settled into his front row seat. Max rested her palm on his desk and leaned forward, lowering her voice.

“Hey. You’ve got this, alright? I’ve seen your art before, and I have no doubt that your poster is gonna blow all the others out of the water. Just breathe, and believe in yourself, okay?”

Will nodded, his smile turning bashful at her earnest words of praise. She punched him lightly on the shoulder and then made her way to her assigned seat at the back of the room. He turned and watched her, his heart pounding for reasons having nothing to do with his project.

The second bell rang and Will started, jerking back around to face the blackboard. Mrs. Walker stood at the lectern, waiting impatiently for the class to be seated. When everyone was settled, she read off the order for that day’s presentations. Will’s name was called last.

He sat restlessly through each speech, his confidence buoying as poster after poster was exhibited. Max was right—artistically, his own poster was superior. But the thought of speaking in front of everyone still filled his stomach with butterflies, and he sank further down his seat the closer it got to his turn.

Finally, Mrs. Walker called his name, and Will stood up onto legs that felt like jelly. He walked slowly up to the board before turning to face the class. Immediately his eyes sought out Max, who gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. Will took a deep breath and carefully

unrolled his poster, holding it up for the entire class to see.

It was an alternative cover of *Ender's Game*, the book Will had read as his free-choice that quarter. While the original cover sported galactic imagery, Will had decided to make the Giant's corpse from the Mind Game the focal point of his drawing. A large skeleton, overgrown with brown grass and shrubs, laid on a dusky orange planet. Around its ribs was a swarm of ant-like creatures, working together to close up the spaces in between each rib with mud and thatch. Near the top right corner of the poster, two suns shone brightly in the sky. The title was displayed prominently in black block letters, and the author's name could be clearly read at the bottom of the poster. In Will's eyes, it was his finest drawing to date, and even though his hands were trembling, he felt a wave of pride wash over him as he revealed the product of his hard work.

Will cleared his throat. "The, um..." He glanced at his teacher, and then at Max. She gave him an encouraging nod, her gaze steady and sure, and he took another deep, shuddering breath. "The book I chose to read was *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card. In it, Ender Wiggin, a, uh, a young kid, is chosen to be trained as the next commander of Earth's galactic military forces. In, um, i-in space. He is put through many traumatic and emotionally, uh, g-grueling experiences, and how it affects him is shown through a game he plays at the Battle School he attends."

His voice grew soft as he spoke of Ender's traumas. It had been hard not to relate to the character while reading the book—both he and Ender had suffered through ordeals no child should ever have to endure. He felt a true kinship with Ender Wiggin. When Ender cried, so did Will; his mom had found him sobbing alone in his room one night after he read the book's climax, and it had taken Will several days before he was emotionally prepared to continue the story. The ending, though satisfying, had left him yearning for more.

Miraculously, Will managed to complete his presentation with only a few more instances of stumbling and stuttering. When he moved to sit back down, Mrs. Walker stopped him.

"Will, your poster is absolutely astounding. If it's alright with you, I'd like to display it in the front of the room."

It wasn't alright with him. Will wanted to take it home and hang it up in his own room, not here. But he didn't feel as though he could refuse, and so reluctantly and wordlessly handed his poster to her. He sat down as she tacked it to the wall next to the blackboard.

"Now," Mrs. Walker said as she turned around, "*that* is the kind of excellence you should all strive for. Thank you, Will, for that marvelous presentation."

Indignant murmurs resounded throughout the classroom, and some kids cast annoyed glances his way. Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and was thankful when the bell announcing sixth period rang just moments later.

As he filed out of the classroom, Will glanced up at his poster one last time. A new uneasiness stirred in his stomach and he swallowed thickly before turning away and walking out the door.

The next day, when Will and Max stepped into English together, they were greeted with snickers and pointed glances. Will felt dread settle heavily on his shoulders.

A crumpled ball of paper struck him on the side of the head, and a kid in the back of the room shouted, "Hey, freak! Love your poster!" The rest of the class sniggered.

Apprehensive, Will slowly turned to look at his project. What he saw made his heart drop into his stomach.

Graffiti marred his poster. Ugly red letters covered nearly every inch of the card stock. Among the legible phrases were "zombie boy", "freak", and "Will Die-rs"; the title now read *Ender's Lame!*, and someone had drawn crude X's on the eye sockets of the Giant's skull.

"Shit," whispered Max next to him. Then, she repeated it louder. "*Shit!*"

Max spun around and fixed their classmates with a vicious glare. “Which one of you bastards did this? Huh?”

The other students seemed to find this more amusing than intimidating, and Max was about to respond to their crass mirth with a vulgar string of abuses when she saw the look on her friend’s face. Will trembled where he stood, his eyes brimming with tears and his gaze locked on his defaced poster.

“Will...”

Max reached out to touch his arm, but he stepped away, head bowed, and slid silently into his seat. Trying to ignore the whispers and mocking words, he stared at his tightly balled fists, wanting nothing more than to disappear.

Max flashed both her middle fingers at the class with an irate flourish before turning her focus back to Will. She lingered by his desk, concern etched across her face, not knowing what to say. Max had just opened her mouth to attempt to comfort him when Mrs. Walker strolled into the room. Seeing the ruined poster, the teacher gasped loudly and whirled on the class.

“What in the hell—who did this?”

She was met only with hushed laughter and poorly hidden smirks. Casting a pitying glance at Will, Mrs. Walker tore down the poster and tucked it behind her desk. “Everyone, to your seats, now.”

If Mrs. Walker said anything else on the subject, Will didn’t hear it. The world around him faded away, until all that was left was the pounding in his ears and a burning in his throat. His entire body shook with the effort of holding back sobs, and he tried furtively to wipe away any tears that managed to fall. It took all his willpower not to flee, to not sprint out of class and try and find a safe place to hide.

As soon as the bell rang, Will couldn’t run to the door fast enough. At the back of the room, Max saw him bolt and stood quickly, snatching her backpack and shouldering her way through the lumbering crowd of teens.

“Will!” Max called, straining her neck to catch a glimpse of him. He disappeared through the door without looking back. “Will!”

She pushed her way to the door and stepped into the hallway, scanning the corridor. By the time she finally spotted him through the crowd, Will was at the far end of the hall, pushing through a pair of double doors that led outside. Max ran after him, ignoring the clamorous toll of the tardy bell.

Max stepped outside and surveyed the back courtyard and the surrounding field. Will was nowhere in sight. She skipped down the steps and was about to check behind the gym when she heard a noise coming from beneath the stairs. Max turned the corner and saw Will nestled under the cold cement steps, his head tucked against his knees and his arms wrapped tight around his legs. His body shook with quiet sobs.

Taking off her backpack, Max slowly settled down next to him. She rested her hand on his shoulder lightly and Will flinched, startled. He raised his head and, upon realizing he was no longer alone, began rubbing furiously at his tear-stained cheeks.

Max caught his wrist gently. “Hey,” she said softly. “You don’t have to do that. Not with me.”

Will avoided her gaze, his lip trembling. He tried to take a breath, but it caught in his throat and a sob slipped out. Max gingerly pulled him against her, and he hesitated only a moment before wrapping his arms around her middle and burying his face into her shoulder. He cried freely now, his sobs muffled by her hoodie.

“They’re all assholes,” Max whispered. “Every single one of them. Sad, pathetic assholes trying to feel better about themselves by shitting on the brightest and the kindest student at this school.”

Will’s embrace tightened in reply.

They sat together, holding each other, until Will’s sobs subsided and his breathing evened. He pulled away, wiping at his eyes and nose, sniffing softly. Max quietly watched as he took a deep breath and looked up at her. His eyes were red and puffy.

“Do you wanna go back inside?” Max asked.

Will shook his head. His voice rasped when he spoke. “Not yet.”

A restful silence stretched between them. Max leaned back against the cool cement, while Will tugged at and tightened his shoelaces abstractedly. A couple hushed minutes passed before Max dragged her backpack closer and unzipped the front pocket. After some digging, she produced a silver lighter and a single cigarette.

Will tilted his head, his brow drawn together in a pinched line. “I didn’t know you smoke.”

“I don’t,” Max admitted, twirling the cigarette between her fingers. “I stole this from Billy a while back, but I just haven’t a reason to try it.” She flicked open the lighter and raised it as though it were a toast. “Here goes nothing.”

Will watched with open curiosity as Max placed the cigarette between her lips and lit it. She took a drag and immediately winced away from the dry bite of the smoke and coughed against the pungent taste of tobacco. Will laughed at that—a light, delighted sound that made Max grin widely, even as her eyes watered and stung. It was the first time since lunch that she had seen him smile.

When Max’s coughing died out, Will held out his hand expectantly.

Max raised an eyebrow at him. “You wanna give it a go?”

He nodded, a playful smile still tugging at his mouth. Max chuckled and obliged, handing him the cig. Will brought it to his lips and inhaled. His face contorted and he shook his head, struggling to hold back a cough to no avail. Max giggled madly. An impish gleam glinted in Will’s eyes, and he took another draw, this time leaning forward and blowing the smoke into Max’s face. She squealed and batted at the fumes while Will laughed loudly. Max gave him a light-hearted shove and managed to snatch the cigarette from his grasp. She retaliated with a puff of smoke back into his face, and soon the two young teens were doubled over, giggling hysterically.

Max wiped away the tears that brimmed in her eyes as a result of the

smoke and laughter. She glanced up to smirk at Will, but stopped suddenly when she realized how close together they now sat. She could feel his breath against her cheek. Will looked just as startled as he gazed back, taking in the short distance between them. Max drew away briskly, casting her eyes to the side, and Will coughed awkwardly. A new silence settled around them, thick with an odd tension.

The cigarette smoldered between Max's forefinger and thumb, nearly forgotten. She peered up at Will through her lashes and held out the cigarette. "Do you want...?"

Will shook his head.

Max shrugged. "Me neither." She tossed the cigarette down and ground it into the concrete with the toe of her sneakers.

As she was putting the lighter away, Will cleared his throat. "Uh, hey, Max, did you—did you mean what you said earlier?" When Max gave him an inquiring look, he elaborated. "About me being the...the brightest and kindest kid in school...Did you mean that?"

"Of course, Will." Max gave him a soft smile, which he returned shyly.

Their hands were resting on the rough cement, less than a finger's width apart. Max felt Will's little finger brush hers lightly, hesitantly, and she responded by gently hooking her pinky over his. She held her breath as Will slowly turned over his hand and let her fingers slide between his own. Max peeked up at Will and saw he was already watching her.

Maybe it was the nicotine, settling in his bones and blanketing him with a humming calm, that gave Will the confidence. Or perhaps it was something innate within him, a natural bravery normally reserved for shadowy monsters and chilling darkness. Max could feel his heartbeat pulsing quickly in his fingers and Will swallowed hard, as if to set his resolve.

He bowed his head, his breath tickling Max's skin. Max let her eyes drift shut and she leaned forward, inching closer to him. Their noses

bumped together as they met in the middle.

The kiss was chaste but sweet, and when they drew apart Max couldn't stop her mouth from curving into a small smile. Will's eyes fluttered open and, seeing her smile, grinned in kind and ducked his head shyly.

The shrill ringing of the bell caused the two young teens to jump. They exchanged a startled look before breaking out into a fit of giggles.

Max bit her lip in an effort to quell her laughter and cast a glance toward the school. "You ready?"

Will only hesitated a moment before he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm ready."

Scrambling to their feet, Max and Will grabbed their backpacks and ran up the steps into the school, still hand in hand.

"Hey, have you guys seen Will?" Mike slid into the desk next to Dustin and glanced between him and Lucas. El took her seat in front of Mike.

Dustin furrowed his brow. "Wait, he's gone too?"

"What do you mean, 'gone too'?"

Lucas leaned forward. "Max wasn't in math last period."

"Will wasn't in history last period either," El spoke up with a frown. "It's not like him to miss class."

Unease settled over the party as the tardy bell tolled.

Dustin was the first one to break the silence. "You don't think—"

“He hasn’t had an episode in a year,” Mike interrupted, shooting down Dustin’s suggestion flatly.

Dustin was about to argue the possibility when the classroom door rattled and swung open. Expecting the teacher, the party was surprised to see Max and Will stepping through the door. Their presence immediately dispelled the disquiet surrounding the group, and they shared a collective sigh of relief. But their newfound solace was quickly replaced with confusion as they observed their two friends.

Small smiles and faint blushes graced Max and Will’s faces. When Max stepped forward to walk to her seat, she cast a furtive glance back at Will, whose smile widened shyly. The smell of cigarette smoke clung to their clothes.

El leaned over and whispered something in Mike’s ear, her brow knit together questioningly. He smiled and nodded, and a giddy grin spread across her face. Dustin and Lucas exchanged a wide-eyed, knowing look.

“Electricity.”

Author's Note:

Thank you for reading! ♥◻